

1973

Dark of the Moon: Costume Design

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Dark of the Moon

-----Costume Design-----

An Honors Project
Respectfully submitted by

Patricia Lynné Huckabee

in fulfillment of the assignment for
Autumn, 1973

Outline

Thesis Statement: Because our University offers no academic course specially in costuming, I decided, under the supervision of my department counselor, Mr. Raymond Caldwell, to attempt an Honors project in this area.

We agreed that my project would include designing, co-ordinating, and assembling costumes for the cast of Dark of the Moon, the University's first production of the 1973-74 theatre season.

I. Restrictions on the designer

- A. Money
- B. Time
- C. Matching set design
- D. Overcoming physical characteristics of each actor

II. A brief synopsis of the play

- A. Setting- time and place
- B. Story and characters

III. Technical compliances

- A. Set design
- B. Type of staging (theatre in the round)
- C. Lighting

IV. The costumes themselves

- A. Research and preparation
- B. Where and how obtained
- C. How costumes tell about the characters
- D. Sketches

V. Summary

- A. Things I would do differently
- B. Lessons gained from experience

When attempting to design costumes for a college theatre production, there are several restrictions placed on the designer and his or her efforts.

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, restriction, is a financial one. One of the 'tricks of the trade' for the costumer is learning to substitute the inexpensive and available for the more expensive and difficult to obtain. Another money saving must is taking stock of all costumes in storage, and making use of material, clothing or shoes which are already on hand.

Time is a restriction on every facet of a theatre production, and costuming is no exception. While it might be going a bit far to assert that time, or the lack of it, stifles the designer's creativity, I think it can be safely said that it does put a damper on some ideas.

When trying to organize forty five costumes within five weeks of rehearsals, it becomes necessary to budget the amount of time spent on each costume although it is difficult to completely free yourself from one character's outfit without matching it alongside two or three costumes being worn by similar characters.

And concerning the problem of matching, the costumer must keep in mind the mood of the play, its setting, and how the stage set itself conveys both. The safest method of selecting the style

of costumes is to learn the ideas of the director and be willing to co-ordinate the costumes with the style of set. For instance, if a realistic set is being used for a period play, it could be quite a deterrent for the cast to be wearing abstract or surrealistically designed costumes.

Although the director casts each character because he feels that that individual will be best in the role, there are often physical incongruities that must be corrected, emphasized or eliminated through costume and, often to an even greater extent, make-up. Two on-stage pregnancies, a sprightly twenty year old playing the part of a decrepit old mountain woman, and a flat chested youth portraying the village harlot were some of the problems encountered in our recent production. But a pillow here and there, oversized clothing, and scoop necklines were found satisfactory in overcoming such physical inconsistencies.

Dark of the Moon is set in the Smokey Mountains and, although there is no particular time period mentioned in the play, the production concerns itself with backwoods characters who live in and around the small community of Buck Creek. This group of lively but ignorant persons is in dramatic contrast to the witches who, headed by Conjur Man and Conjur Woman, live above the valley on Old Baldy Mountain.

In our theatre, the production was executed in three-quarter

round, which means that the audience was on stage with the actors and, in fact, made up the acting area boundaries on three sides. The fourth side of the stage was the set itself--- a craggy, cavernous mountain (Old Baldy) with the bottom areas leveling off to become a part-time cabin, general store, and church.

While such intimate staging has the definite advantage of almost demanding audience interest , there are a few drawbacks. Costumes, properties and make-up must be planned which will be convincing even under the scrutinizing eyes of audience members often not more than three or four feet away. Indeed, for such staging, lighting and distance can not be depended upon to cover up technical imperfections.

In order to get a foothold on designing, it is standard procedure for the costumer in our theatre to spend time in the library doing research to find how other productions have executed their designs. By following these guidelines, it is easier to adapt the director's ideas to your own and compare them with preceeding productions.

As in the case of Dark of the Moon, my research yielded sketches and photos of costumes from two very different productions. In one, the players wore jeans and sweatshirts--- except for the witches who wore shorts and midriff blouses and the play was performed on a bare stage.

Another, done around 1948, used realistic dress from that

present day.

After taking stock of the costumes already in Verser which might have been usable, we settled on a style comparable to what was probably worn by poor mountaineers in the late thirties. Then more research was done so as to find out what kinds of actual clothing, shoes and accessories were worn in that era.

Step two in my preparation was to measure each actor, charting a page with his character's name, age of character, and a complete list of his body measurements and shoe and hat sizes. After I became familiar with the charts and the actor each represented, it was a little easier to match an age with a characteristic mode of dress. For instance, young people under twenty went without shoes, middle aged women carried shawls and wore muted colors or soft prints, and middle aged men were commonly attired in khakis and overalls.

All together there were some forty five costumes used in the play. Fourteen of these were witch costumes which were original designs.

Although in some cases I think it might have been easier to make costumes for the townspeople, we would have run the risk of having them look new and 'fresh', whereas for our production, we strove to get across an air of the unfempt, unironed, backwoods American of about forty years ago.

Therefore, much of my time was spent collecting ragged flannel shirts and scuffed up boots from cast members, and trekking almost daily to Abilities Unlimited to check for assorted sizes of khakis, straight- legged jeans, and out-of-style women's dresses.

While some of the costumes left from prior productions were usable, each in its turn had to be altered to fit the new character. For instance, in the women's clothing hems were taken, seams were let out, trim was removed, shawls and aprons were added.

In all, expenses for costumes totaled at about \$88.54. This figure does not include estimates for clothing borrowed from individuals or found on hand in the theatre.

The chief purpose of the costume is to convey to the audience a few ready facts about the character. For example, because Barbara Allen was the pivotal character around which the story revolved, her five outfits had to be carefully designed in order to show the contrast between her and the other townspeople and changes within Barbara herself which occurred as the story progressed.

As Barbara first appears in scene two, she wears a scarlet calico dress with tiny blue flowers in the background. The bright red in the outfit instantly set her apart from the other girls and women on stage who wore predominantly dark solids or muted calico prints. The scarlet color and low, scoop neckline emphasized her brazen lustiness while the soft blue background of the flowers

signified a lack of complete depravity and perhaps a longing for fidelity and loyalty within herself.

The next scene shows her "home-y side" as she wears a blue and purple frock done in a paisley print very popular at that time. In scene four Barbara is married in a light green print dress. Although the dress could not be white, (Barbara is now about four months pregnant) the soft subtleness of her attire set her in ironic contrast to the harsh remarks being made about her.

As Barbara gives birth to a still born child in Act II she wears a white flannel night shirt which adds a look of youth and innocence to her weary figure as she lies in bed.

During the climax of the play, which is in the church, and the final scene, Barbara wears a solid dress of sky blue trimmed with the faintest touch of lace around the neckline and cuffs. The blue symbolizes her year-long faithfulness to her husband John, the warlock-made-human. In spite of her desire to be true to John she is forcibly raped by an old suitor during the revival, and not long after, dies in John's arms atop Old Baldy Mountain.

Of course not every character in the production had so many costume changes. In fact, John, the witch boy, had only two outfits, although they were intended to show an even greater change in character than were Barbara's. As the play opens, John wears black tights and a poncho type draping of dyed erosion netting. During this first scene, Conjur Man and Conjur Woman appear wearing

indistinguishable layers of clothing in earth colors of browns, grays and black. The length and ragged state of their attire indicate age and gives hints as to their hermit-like existence. It is Conjur Woman who, in spite of plaintiff cries from the jealous female witches, performs the spell allowing John to become human.

As a mortal man, John next appears in the middle of scene two wearing faded jeans which are short and leave exposed several inches above his ankles, and a worn flannel shirt, too short in the sleeves. These articles were chosen especially to get across the idea that John would not be likely to come across human clothing that would fit well, and, they also helped emphasize his larger stature above the mortals in the play.

Costumes for the male witches were like John's — black tights and five foot drapings of erosion netting worn over the neck. This netting had to be hand dyed a piece at a time so that each one would take on a different hue. All were dyed with differing amounts and combinations of earth colors such as browns, greens, wine, black and gray.

The female witches also wore the drapings of erosion netting over form fitting black body suits and black tights. Each body suit was sewn of stretch material so that zippers, which often fail, were not necessary. Though they were necessary to cover the witches, their purpose was not to be seen so much as to be an

alluring backdrop for the netting which emphasized the eerie movements of their inhuman bodies.

Among the human characters in the production were Preacher Haggler, a middle aged 'man of the cloth' well respected by the God fearing inhabitants of Buck Creek. Haggler was considered well dressed in his dusty black suit, white shirt, and thin gray tie. Although his clothing would have been considered quite shabby by our standards, he took pride in his appearance.

The Allen family attire typified the style of clothing worn in the home. From Pa Allen's knee-sprung khakis and patched flannel shirt to Ma's non-fitting brown house dress and apron, to son Floyd's outgrown jeans, faded print hand-me-down shirt, and rope belt, costumes remained pretty close to this style for each family in the play.

For me, one of the biggest headaches was over the two aged ladies, Miss Hattie and Sister Greeny Gorman. It was extremely difficult to find clothing loose enough so as not to emphasize their youthful figures without having the clothes absolutely hang and make them look overweight. We finally solved part of the problem by having them relax their posture, carry shawls and wear straight shapeless garments.

In retrospect, I can truthfully say there are a few things I would do differently. For one thing, all zippers would be replaced

with adhesive strips so as to prevent any backstage panics because of a 'hung zipper'.

Also, each player would, after studying his own character, turn in a rough sketch of his idea of a costume. By this means, I would hope to find a little originality and variety of thought. Of course, these sketches, not unlike my own, would have to be first approved by the director.

I think above all else my project helped me grow in appreciation for all the technical aspects of a production, besides making me more aware of costuming design, co-ordination and contrast in other productions.



1. The play opens on Old Baldy Mountain with Conjur Woman (top center) in conference with John the witch boy (at her feet) and other witches.



2. Outside the Allens cabin, Preacher Haggler (center) offers Barbara's parents a solution to her problem.



3. After his transformation into a human, John is entranced by a female witch in the forest.

4. Barbara Allen, now several months pregnant, fends off advances from her old suitor, Marvin Hudgens, as John smoulders.





5. The townspeople gather for church in this scene, which climaxes the play.



6. In the final scene, John becomes a witch again— much to the delight of the female witches.